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Mexico's Next President

Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid is weighing a decision that has enormous implications for the United States: his choice of successor as the next six-year president of Mexico.

There will be a pro forma election, of course, but the winner will be the person de la Madrid anoints. That's how the system works south of the border. De la Madrid isn't giving out any hints about his choice. We spoke to him recently in Mexico City, and his coyness was impermeable.

Still, our sources in Mexico City and in various Western intelligence agencies say the odds at this time—a year before the election—favor Interior Minister Manuel Bartlett Diaz. And as luck would have it, Bartlett would be the best choice as far as U.S. interests are concerned.

Two things appear to make Bartlett unbeatable as long as he doesn't step out of line on his way toward de la Madrid's blessing.

First, as the official who ran every election—clean or fraudulent—since 1981, Bartlett has the support of many functionaries of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, the dominant Mexican political party. Quite simply, they owe him their jobs.

The second reason is the use Bartlett has made of his own institutional

power base. Insiders tell us he has amassed huge confidential files on party leaders and anyone else with political influence in Mexico.

De la Madrid will reveal his choice in September or October. If, as we predict, Bartlett is the designated successor, it will mean a rosier period for U.S.-Mexican relations. Bartlett has personal relationships with a number of important U.S. officials, while no influential U.S. politician seems to have ties with the two other top candidates under consideration by de la Madrid: Energy Minister Alfredo del Mazo and Budget Minister Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

Bartlett is described as "a smart, wily fellow" by one U.S. official who makes his living studying Mexico. He is humorless and tough, as befits the head of the Interior Ministry, which does all the dirty work the ruling party needs done.

It was from the Interior Ministry that Luis Echeverria Alvarez rose to become president in 1970. He gained a reputation for brutality when his minions killed some 400 people in putting down strikes that began with student unrest in 1968.

It's interesting to see how Bartlett handled a similar situation earlier this year. A student strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico

ended peacefully after 19 days with concessions to the students.

Reagan administration sources are convinced that the choice of budget boss Salinas as the next president would be disastrous for U.S. interests. Among other suspected sins, he is thought likely to declare a long-term moratorium on interest payments to U.S. banks and individuals for Mexico's massive debts. Furthermore, they believe he is a committed leftist in foreign policy.

Del Mazo, brought into the Cabinet only last summer, has risen in esteem because he is a proven campaigner, looks good on television—and as energy minister oversees PEMEX, the state-owned oil company, which is indispensable to the Mexican economy.

None of the hopefuls has yet won the endorsement of Fidel Velasquez, long-time head of the Confederation of Mexican Workers. Even de la Madrid has acknowledged privately that Velasquez will have great influence in the selection.

But it is still de la Madrid who will make the ultimate decision, and all the candidates would do well to keep their ambitions from showing too blatantly. One who didn't was the respected treasury minister, Jesus Silva Herzog. He got a bit too pushy, and de la Madrid fired him last summer.

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